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REACHING OUT: Beyond School Walls

by MariRae Dopke



Picture yesterday's library. The image that typically comes to mind is a drab, ultra quiet, hear a pin drop atmosphere. A warden is standing guard ready to shush chatty patrons, collect overdue fees, and limit the number of books for borrowing. As we chuckle at that old stereotype, think about how libraries and the role of librarians have evolved. We know how rich and dynamic our media centers are today and how engaging the lessons we create can be. Sure, we network with teachers regularly, but do parents and the community understand our contribution to better education? How do we bust the old myths and let them see that the library is a vibrant place where students and teachers meet to exchange ideas, debate and explore? Are they aware of our mission is to help students develop a love for books and to become well versed in information literacy skills that will enable them to explore the world via print and electronic media?

Delivering this message to the public is a challenge to be met. By working together and reaching out, we can help foster visibility and support for school library media programs and professionals alike nationwide. You will find many ideas for outreach in "[Toolkit for School Library Media Programs](#)" created by the American Library Association (ALA) in partnership with the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). Some are included in this feature.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Working inside your school first can help spread the word as you begin to market your media center to teachers, students, their parents and the community.

- Develop a Mission Statement for the media program & display it prominently. Use this statement in newsletters, on the Web, etc.
- Send a welcoming package to new staff at the beginning of the year with a brochure and other info about the library.
- Try networking with each teacher in your building at least annually to discuss their curriculum needs. Get teacher's thinking before the meeting by giving them a menu of media center activities that may dovetail with their lesson objectives. A pre-organizer should help them hone in on what you can do together to enhance academics & make learning fun.
- Use "tent cards" in the lunch room featuring library services & the Web site address.
- Use 'Worth of Mouth Marketing'. Ask involved and enthused students to spread the word to others about good things happening at the library media center.

Elementary LMS, Sue Kowalski knows first hand how the buzz of students as 'Library Ambassadors' serves as a powerful force. This is an important component to her media center marketing plan.

"Libraries, like all businesses, have happy customers and need to tap into their energy to serve as ambassadors of all that is amazing in the library. In my school library, for example, I have several "teams" of ambassadors that help me spread news about upcoming events (book fairs, guest speakers, community events, contests and more!). I have a staff of classroom ambassadors in grades 1-5 who work on a rotating basis in the morning to collect books, make deliveries, hang promotional materials, and make morning announcements on the PA system. My after school book club students are a powerful team as well and they, too, are empowered to deliver news, information, and "hot news"

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to parents, teachers, and peers. Additionally, we've held several Library Expos, structured events in which students at one grade level teach all aspects of the library program to younger students. I consistently rely on the power of happy customers to promote what our library has to offer. It is essential that a library staff empower its patrons to play a significant role in the promotion and marketing of its programs, services, and materials. Don't let your library remain a "well-kept secret." Get out the good word!"

OPPORTUNITIES & EVENTS

How many outreach opportunities do you have at your school each year? Capitalize on informal gatherings as well as annual and special events you create. Every situation is a change to generate excitement and create good will.

- Open Houses – Consider creating a library guide for parents on how to help kids use library resources for research, book reports, etc. Billboard this brochure along with refreshments at the front entrance to your school. Play off a catch phrase that will draw them in. Give tours of the library with emphasis on innovative resources that may not have been available when the parents were in school.

Special school events that draw adults in such as sports, plays and recitals are the perfect time to take advantage of a captive audience. Julie Matz, a primary grades library media specialist in Queens County, New York enjoys these opportunities.



"As part of an English Language Learners (ELL) Saturday program for families, I was able to give book talks and offer extra RIF books to ELL families. It was primarily a dance program, using the library for its refreshment area. I took advantage of the audience and put out a big display of picture and chapter books. It was so exciting to see our students showing their favorite books to their parents. On another occasion, this time Parent Teacher Night, I had a display of free books for parents and children. Two young mothers were eying the Babysitter's Club books, picking them up and putting them back down and whispering together as they moved around the table. I asked them if they wanted a book to take home, "Oh, no thank you," they replied, "These books are for the kids". "No," I said, "They can be long lost friends for readers from another time, like you two!" I smiled to myself as I watched them walk down the hall, each with a

paperback in their hands, heads together, remembering their joy of reading not so many years ago."

Julie says it is a well know fact in her school that if your child has a project, you can come to the library for help in finding research sources or book report material.

"I service all of the staff as parents from our Advanced Placement to the kitchen staff. In this way, our library resources reach into the homes of our staff members, and the hands of their children. It's very gratifying!"

SPECIAL PROJECTS


Students at Naperville Central High in Naperville, Illinois participated in an exemplary outreach project through the Library of Congress's VETERAN'S HISTORY PROJECT. The project collects personal recollections of wartime veterans to honor their service and share their stories with current and future generations. After much discussion and preparation, Naperville students met with war veterans and recorded interviews on audio and videotape. Librarian Tom Bohdan was motivated to gain support on the project from Naperville faculty after hearing a surprising statistic.

"They are losing about a thousand WWII veterans a day. Their stories are priceless, many stories have never been recorded, and many stories have never been mentioned to their sons and daughters."

It took little convincing for faculty to give the go-ahead for participation. In fact, Bohdan believes it was the synergy of faculty working as a team on the project that led to its success.

In the VETERAN'S HISTORY PROJECT as with any special project, meaningful collaboration is essential for success.



 Syracuse University, the Library and the Office of Residence Life collaborate on a big library outreach event that started in 2006 called the Library Lock-In. Collaboration is instrumental to the event's success with the University's Office of Residence Life playing a major role in the event's planning and administration.

LIBRARY LOCK-IN has become a popular annual happening where music, food, fun and competition combine as students stay up half the night in Bird Library. They come prepared to party and work diligently, in three forty-minute rounds testing their research skills. Librarian Michael Pasqualoni, co-chair of the 2006 and 2007 Lock-In events, loves the event saying it works against the stereotype that research is a dreary process.



"When you actually meet serious scholars who get into research and love what they do, it's anything but dreary. In our own small way, it's combining a party with an SAT exam and we look at it that way."

The event requires long-range planning by library and campus staff. Residence Life personnel arranged all event promotion, registration, party food, music, raffles and prizes for the Lock-In. Library staff handled competition questions, rules and monitoring.

"We made a few changes based on student feedback. We reduced the difficulty level of the questions a bit. We've mixed up questions that require on-line research along with more traditional book library resources and other formats."

Pasqualoni cites there are multiple goals that pay off from the Library Lock-In event.

"Freshmen at a university have so many things to get to know that it's so easy for the library to become a foreign place. They may not have time when they get here to learn their way around a large facility like this so we're contributing to that learning process. I think we're also letting them know that the staff at the library are friendly, approachable folks that can help them with their research, and they can have relationships with us throughout their years here at the campus."

The Library Lock-In theme could easily be adapted for use in a High School Library to help orient incoming students.

GETTING THE PRINCIPAL ONBOARD

Yes, this is also part of an outreach effort. Library Media Specialist Michele DiGregorio-Mercado strongly believes that "The principal needs to be included in library meetings in order to understand the importance of the library and how it can be used most effectively." Administrative support is essential to achieving the goals of any library program. Be sure to provide evidence of what's being achieved through the program in terms of student learning. Be a part of administration level meetings, communicate regularly, and document results.

GEARING UP

There are many creative, innovative things that can be done to get the word out regarding the stellar resources and programs in the library that enrich education in your school. Plan to tackle just one or two accomplishments each semester so your 'Project Outreach' doesn't become overwhelming. Most of what you do may be used year after year with minor revisions. If you have graduate interns, have them help authoring your first brochure or newsletter. With some planning and just a little time, you'll build a repertoire of materials that will work for you, again and again, to promote your library media program and the good work you do.

As mentioned earlier, many of the ideas and strategies featured in this article are from the 'Toolkit for School Library Media Programs' from the American Library Association (ALA) in partnership with the American Association of School Librarians (AASL).

About the Author



MariRae Dopke-Wilson is a veteran media producer. She is the feature story writer for the *Educators' Spotlight Digest* and producer of many video clips for the *S.O.S. for Information Literacy* project. In the past several years, she has interviewed dozens of library media specialists and captured their stories in both print and video.